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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SUVA 000018

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE 1/8/07: INTERIM GOVERNMENT MINISTERS;
CHAUDHRY TO FINANCE; INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES; APPARENT
MURDER IN RFMF CUSTODY

REF: SUVA 15 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

1. (C) Eight ministers in Commodore Bainimarama's interim government were sworn in on Jan. 8. Several have connections to Ratu Epeli Ganilau's National Alliance Party (NAP) that failed miserably in last May's elections; but on the whole the group seems reasonably well qualified. Fiji Labor Party (FLP) leader Mahendra Chaudhry phoned to inform us he will accept the Finance, Public Enterprise, and Sugar portfolios tomorrow. We ensured he was aware of USG views. He already was. And we urged him to convince Bainimarama to protect human rights. Papua New Guinea reportedly intends to stress "rule of law" in regional deliberations on how to deal with Fiji's coup. Serious RFMF abuses of civilians have continued, including one apparent beating to death last weekend. The Army has taken over "security" at Fiji's only gold mine, puzzling the Australian owners who shut the mine down a month ago. End summary.

Eight Ministers named for interim government

2. (C) President Iloilo swore in eight persons as interim ministers on Jan. 8. Several more are expected within the next few days. Bainimarama has stated publicly that nobody in the interim administration will be permitted to run in the next general election. The list includes:

-- Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, Interim Minister for Foreign Affairs. Ratu Epeli was to repeat as Fiji's High Commissioner to London under the Qarase Government. He was Speaker of Parliament from 2001-2006 and previously was Deputy Secretary of Foreign Affairs and a roving ambassador in the late 1990s. Ratu Epeli, Commander of the RFMF in 1987, was overseas when Rabuka engineered the first of his 1987 coups. Thereafter, Ratu Epeli became High Commissioner to London the first time. Ratu Epeli is married to Adi Koila, a daughter of Fiji father figure Ratu Mara. It is common knowledge that Adi Koila has been an advocate of Bainimarama's "clean up." Koila's younger brother LtCol. Tevita Mara is Commander, 3FIR, in the RFMF and reputedly has been intimately involved in abusive tactics against human-rights activists. After the swearing in, Ratu Epeli told the press the priority now is to normalize diplomatic relations with allies, including Australia and New Zealand. If traditional allies continue with a "hard stance," Ratu Epeli said Fiji would be forced to strengthen ties with Asian

countries, particularly China. He said foreign sanctions would not deter the interim government from "moving the country forward."

-- Poseci Bune, Interim Minister for Public Service and Public Service Reform. Bune, reportedly an illegitimate son of Ratu Mara, has long been active in Fiji Labor Party politics. He was a Minister in the Chaudhry Government in 1999, and was Minister for the Environment in Qarase's multi-party government of 2006. In earlier years he was a civil servant, including as CEO of the Public Service Commission. Bune was deputy leader of the FLP going into the May 2006 elections; but he and Chaudhry had a falling out that led to the FLP sanctioning Bune late last year.

-- Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Interim Attorney General and Minister for Justice. Khaiyum, a Muslim, is a young Suva lawyer who was General Counsel of the Colonial Group of Companies, President of the Fiji Young Lawyers Association, and a board member of Transparency International Fiji. His brother Riaz is a TV journalist in New Zealand. Khaiyum has had an excellent reputation. While a student at the University of Hong Kong in 2001, he wrote an open letter decrying corruption within the Fiji Muslim League. After the swearing in, Khaiyum said his portfolio includes "anti-corruption and electoral reform." He said there is no specific time frame for elections.

-- Jone Senilagakali, Interim Minister for Health. Senilagakali was Bainimarama's interim PM for the month following the Dec. 5 coup. See previous reporting for bio data.

SUVA 00000018 002 OF 004

-- Netani Sukanaivalu, Interim Minister for Education. Sukanaivalu was an unsuccessful National Alliance Party (NAP) candidate in the May 2006 elections, garnering only 788 out of 12812 votes cast in the Tamavua/Laucala Fijian Communal seat. (The winner from Qarase's SDL received 10,880 votes). Sukanaivalu is a former Fiji Navy officer, who was once head of the Fiji Institute of Technology, and now reportedly is a businessman in the Suva area.

-- Manu Korovulavula, Interim Minister for Transport and Works. Korovulavula was another unsuccessful NAP candidate in the 2006 elections, running in a Suva open seat. He was head of the Road Transport Authority and a minister in Rabuka's SVT Government in the 1990s. He was also a Senator.

-- Taito Waradi, Interim Minister for Commerce and Industry. Waradi is the long-time President of the Fiji Chamber of Commerce. He came out immediately after the coup in support of Bainimarama's "clean up." After his swearing in, Waradi said his main task is to create investor confidence and rebuild the economy.

-- Laufitu Malani, Interim Minister for Women and Social Welfare. Malani was a Senator following the 2006 elections and in that role publicly raised concerns about sale of freehold land to overseas investors. She comes from a chiefly family in Ra Province.

-- Viliame Naupoto, Director for Immigration, not a ministerial position. Naupoto is a Navy Commander at the RFMF's strategic headquarters and a close associate of Bainimarama.

Chaudhry to accept Finance Ministry

13. (C) Mahendra Chaudhry, former PM deposed by the 2000 coup and still head of the FLP, phoned today to let the Ambassador know he intends to accept Bainimarama's offer of the Finance, Public Enterprises, and Sugar Reform portfolios. He put it in terms of having to move Fiji forward and get back to democracy ASAP. When the Ambassador noted how disastrous the

past coups had been for Fiji and for Chaudhry personally on two occasions, Chaudhry suggested this coup is different because the Qarase Government was so awful. "Fiji could not have survived another five years." The Ambassador reiterated the USG view of coups, including this one, and reminded Chaudhry of the visa ban announcement. The Ambassador also urged Chaudhry to exert any influence he has on the Commodore to end abuses by the RFMF against the public. He said he intends to do so.

PIF, MSG, Commonwealth interest

14. (C) Chaudhry mentioned in his phone call that he hopes a visit by a Pacific Island Forum (PIF) eminent persons group (EPG) next week and a possible Commonwealth visit soon can help to normalize relationships with the world. We spoke with PNG High Commissioner Eafeare today about the PIF/EPG in the context of a Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) meeting to take place in Honiara later this week to consider the Fiji situation. Some NGOs in Fiji have expressed concern to us that the MSG may offer support to Bainimarama's interim government, including in PIF meetings, at the urging of Fiji MFA CEO Mataitoga. Eafeare said he will chair the Honiara meeting, and it is his government's intention to keep the MSG on the side of "rule of law and democracy" in dealing with Fiji, including in the PIF context.

Murder in RFMF custody? Other abuses

15. (U) RFMF spokesman Leweni has admitted to the media that soldiers took a rural villager from Tailevu Province (north of Suva) into custody early Jan. 5. A few hours later, RFMF soldiers delivered the villager's badly abused body to Queen Elizabeth Barracks (QEB) hospital, and the body was then transported to Suva's CWM hospital, where the villager was officially pronounced dead. However, Leweni insists the villager's injuries had been sustained before he was detained. Other villagers deny that. The apparent murder seems to have caught the public attention in a way somewhat lesser abuses of human rights advocates have not. Opposition Leader Beddoes and others have called for an open, publicly-revealed investigation into what took place. Note:

SUVA 00000018 003 OF 004

we hear that the RFMF recently warned Beddoes to "stop talking" but that he does not intend to comply. Former Minister Ken Zinck, one of the first to suffer intimidation at QEB after the coup, reportedly was beaten by soldiers in Nadi last weekend after he was overheard in a bar criticizing Bainimarama's swearing in as PM. A Fijian soldier in the British Army and his friend were beaten by soldiers at QEB on the weekend after a taxi driver reported at a military check point that the passengers had been chuckling about the Army patrols. Spokesman Leweni responded that the men were "behaving in an unruly manner and were highly drunk."

Other criminal issues

16. (U) The Commander of the Fiji Navy, Francis Kean, in the company of a lawyer, presented himself to the police late last week to respond to evidence that he beat a man to death at the wedding reception for Bainimarama's daughter on Dec. 30. The police say they have now forwarded the file on the case to the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) for consideration. The DPP office told the media on Jan. 8 that they have not received the file. RFMF spokesman Leweni told the media the RFMF has not interfered in the investigation. He warned the media that "irresponsible reporting" on such matters will be seen as "intent to create instability." When Australian conman Peter Foster failed to appear at a Suva court today as scheduled, the judge issued a bench warrant for Foster's re-arrest. Per reftels, the military took Foster from police custody in mid-December. He appears to have cut a deal with Bainimarama: to provide evidence of Qarase Government corruption in exchange for a chance to have charges quashed.

17. (U) Army troops "took over security" at the Vatakuola gold mine during the weekend. RFMF spokesman Leweni said the reasons were to safeguard explosives and to ensure evidence is secured. Bainimarama told the media a couple weeks ago that an inquiry would take place into the announcement by Emperor Gold Mines (EGM) Ltd, the Vatakuola mine's Australian owner, that it was closing down operations in Fiji. That announcement took place on the day of Bainimarama's coup, Dec. 5. EGM's expat manager at Vatakuola expressed puzzlement at the Army's move to secure the mine and suggested (rightly) that it will send a very poor signal to potential foreign investors.

Comment

18. (C) In general, Bainimarama's interim government ministers announced so far appear reasonably well-qualified to take up portfolios. The group seems united in wanting to "put the past behind and find a way forward for the good of Fiji." None seem to see any serious issue in colluding with an unconstitutional military takeover. It is clear that Ratu Epeli Ganilau, married to a Mara daughter, a former Commander of the RFMF, and leader of the NAP that could not win a seat in 2006 elections, is among the "shadowy figures" who were advising Bainimarama before the coup. It appears nearly the entire Mara family has played roles, which seems odd, since it was Bainimarama who reportedly pushed Ratu Mara to step down from the Presidency during the coup confusion in May 2000.

19. (C) It is increasingly obvious that Chaudhry, leader of the FLP that lost the 2006 elections by a relatively small margin, has been another of the "shadowy figures." Chaudhry is a puzzle. If Bainimarama's instruction holds that all ministers in the interim government will be forbidden from running in the next election, then Chaudhry seemingly is giving up elective politics. For someone with politics in his blood, that must be a shock. One wonders if Chaudhry has wrangled an exception from the general rule for himself. On the other hand, it is hard to see how Chaudhry could calculate that the FLP's collusion with Bainimarama can lead to a win in the next elections in any case. The FLP's base is the ethnic-Indian community, which has shown some support for the coup; however, to win an election the FLP must win significant votes from the ethnic-Fijian community that reportedly is very unhappy with the coup. Another possible explanation for Chaudhry's decision is that he calculates the interim administration will be in place for quite a few years.

SUVA 00000018 004 OF 004

110. (C) RFMF abuses of civilians seem to be increasing in variety and severity, a real worry. An early test of the interim government will be whether it has the will and the ability to influence Bainimarama and his RFMF cohort to eliminate those abuses. Other tests, of course, will be whether this unelected group can move Fiji back rapidly to democracy and toward economic health.
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